Change in progress leading to atypical asymmetries in the vowel system

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Diachronic linguistics has shown that vowels of the same height tend to cluster and behave in a remarkably similar way (e.g. Wiesinger 1982). As a result, the development of the vowel system of most West Germanic languages and dialects is characterised by a high degree of parallelism, as can be illustrated by the classic symmetry of the Great Vowel Shift during which the high long vowels î – û were both diphthongized and the other long vowels moved pairwise upward (e.g. the mid long vowels ê – ô raised to [iː] – [uː]). Similar processes have taken place in Standard German and Dutch: vowels that share the same feature of height [+high], [+mid] or [+low] have developed along parallel paths, compare for instance the diphthongization in *Eis/ijs* 'ice' and *Haus/huis* 'house'. These vowels thus develop(ed) as a series rather than as individual sounds.

This symmetrical development was also clearly noticeable in the distribution of Germanic umlaut, that generally can be seen as the fronting of a (stressed) back vowel caused by an initially (unstressed) *i* or *j* in the following syllable. Most words with umlaut originally differed from their non-umlauted stems mainly by the feature [±back], as for instance German *Fuß* 'foot' – *Füße* 'feet', in English additionally also by [±round]. The same holds for the eastern Dutch dialects (e.g. [muːs] 'mouse' – [myːs]/[miːs] 'mice'), where the development of these vowels also maintained a back/front parallelism. Furthermore, in most of the southeastern Dutch dialects, the opposition is intensified by a contrast between two tone accents, traditionally called 'tone accent 1' (TA 1) and 'tone accent 2' (TA 2), which is characterised by a slightly prolonged pronunciation. The parallelism in the vowel system has only rarely been phased out, e.g. the development of West Germanic û in a central area of the southern Dutch dialects (Goossens 2000; compare German *Maus* [maus] – *Mäuse* [mɔizə]). In several dialects with an additional tone opposition long high vowels with TA 1 developed to diphthongs, whereas they remained long monophthongs under TA 2 (e.g. [muː^{2}s] 'mouse' – [mœy^{1}s]/[mɛi^{1}s] 'mice').

The tone-vowel interactions in these dialects have been and still are the object of several studies. Non-tonal related sound shifts, on the other hand, have so far been somewhat neglected or at least not systematically studied, so the rather atypical difference in height between West Germanic ô and its umlaut (e.g. [buːk] 'book' – [beːk] 'books') in Zutendaal in the Belgian province of Limburg has remained unnoticed. Historic data reveal a clear example of a (recent) pull or drag chain and illustrate two of Labovs (Labov 1994) general principles of linguistic change: firstly, the original back vowel [uː] fronted to [yː] (e.g. [buːk] became [byːk] 'belly') after all rounded front vowels had already been unrounded in an earlier stage (e.g. [biːk] 'bellies'); secondly, West Germanic [oː] rose and filled the empty position of [uː], in turn leaving behind an empty position.

This development raises some interesting questions to be answered. Why did West Germanic ô in Zutendaal not front as West Germanic û (as for instance Philadelphian /ow/ and /uw/, e.g. Tucker 1944), but instead moved upward? What are the implications of this shift with respect to the other subsystems of the Zutendaal vowel system? How can the relationship between the words with umlaut and their non-umlauted stems be redefined from a phonological point of view? Finally, are there any factors indicating that this reported instance of change in progress will move on, i.e. that present [ɔː] (and [aː]) will also rise or on the contrary rather remain stable?